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CHAPTER 1

AT THE HEART OF SOVIET CIVILIZATION

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"Antimodernity is possibly more modern and complex than what it rejects; in any case it is gloomier, blunter, more brutal, and more cynical."

—Peter Sloterdijk (484)

THE MEANING OF THE TRICKSTER TROPE

The relative stability—despite all mutations and metamorphoses—of the trickster trope is defined not only by the content of concrete images, but also by the traits we wish to see when looking at the trickster. Although the list of scholarly works on the trickster as a mythological and literary hero includes hundreds of titles, this field of research emerged only in the nineteenth century and developed exponentially in the post-war period.[1] Anthropologists of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century note the ambivalence of the trickster figure in folklore and myth and try to interpret the "baser" traits of the trickster as either the outcome of the degradation of the culture hero (Daniel Brinton) or the underdevelopment of archaic cultures devoid of altruistic values (Franz Boas). The latter point of view appears in C.G. Jung's commentary to Paul Radin's famous work *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*

1 See on the history of the trickster studies: Doty and Hynes, Babcock-Abrahams, and Lowie.

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(1956): "[W]e can see why the myth of the trickster was preserved and developed: like many other myths, it was supposed to have a therapeutic effect. It holds the earlier low intellectual and moral level before the eyes of the more highly developed individual, so that he shall not forget how things looked yesterday." (Jung, 207)

However, in the same volume Karl Kerényi first brings up the cultural importance of the trickster's ambivalence: "Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, and experience of what is not permitted." (Kerényi, 185) This philosophical approach to the study of the trickster gained new support with the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on the structure of myth, in which the trickster was considered the mediator who guarantees communication between the binary oppositions that organize the myth. To the trickster-mediator, who unites in himself the traits of the culture hero and the buffoon, Lévi-Strauss assigned the role of the symbolic mechanism which overcomes contradictions by means of bricolage, tricks, or transgressions. A more poststructuralist understanding of the trickster emerged in the 1980s–90s on the basis of this structuralist conception, cogently summarized in the essay collection *Mythical Trickster Figure* (1993) edited by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, as well as in the monograph *Trickster Makes the World* (1998) by Lewis Hyde. According to this conception, the very traits of the trickster that instilled the most doubt in the older generation of scholars, namely his destructive impulses, came to be understood as the founding forces of language and culture: "The trickster discovers creative fabulation, feigning, and fibbing, the playful construction of fictive worlds," he is a mediator "who works 'by means of a lie that is really a truth, a deception that is in fact a revelation.'" (Hyde 45, 72)

In Soviet culture, a similar understanding of the trickster's role was reached much earlier, namely in Mikhail Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and carnival culture (written in the 1940s, first published in 1963), as well as in his "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (written in the late 1930s, first published in 1975), in particular in the section "The Functions of the Rogue, Clown and Fool in the Novel." The traits of these characters permit the forging of a direct link to the semantics of the trickster

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trope, which unite all the different personae with Bakhtin's philosophy of carnival culture and carnivalization: "These figures are laughed at by others and *themselves* as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure … their entire function consists in externalizing things (true enough, it is not their own being they externalize, but a reflected, alien being—however, that is all they have)." (Bakhtin, 1981: 159–160)

A summary of contemporary research on the trickster reveals at least four structural and semantic aspects of the trickster trope, all of which are heavily accentuated in Soviet culture:

(1) **Ambivalence and Mediation.** These two interconnected and mutually reinforcing characteristics constitute the core of the trickster trope. All tricksters function as cultural mediators that fuse otherwise incompatible features (natural and artificial, foreign and domestic, animal and human, marginal and mainstream, ideological and non-ideological, sometimes male and female, and of course, above all, infantile and adult). This exact cultural function is responsible for the elusiveness and ambivalence immanent to any trickster:

> Anomalous, a-nomos, without normativity, the trickster appears on the edge or just beyond existing borders, classifications and categories. […] [T]he trickster is cast as an 'out' person, and his activities are often outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order. No borders are sacrosanct, be they religious, cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical. Breaking down division lines, the trickster characteristically moves swiftly and impulsively back and forth across all borders with virtual impunity. A visitor everywhere, especially to those places that are off limits, the trickster seems to dwell in no single place but to be in continual transit through all realms marginal and liminal. (Hynes 1993b: 34–35)

The ability to collapse opposites, to marry the high and the low, order and disorder, creation and destruction, is central to any trickster and is also responsible for his/her shape-shifting, the fluidity of his/her identity, and the ambivalence of his/her choices and positions. Moreover,

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this trait also explains why categories of morality are hardly applicable to tricksters: in Lewis Hyde's words, tricksters are "amoral not immoral." (Hyde, 10)

(2) **Liminality and Transgressive Vitality.** There is a direct link between the trickster's ambivalence and his/her liminality. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams was the first researcher to connect the trickster with the concept of liminality introduced by Victor Turner in the 1960s:

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate state states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, customs, conventions, and ceremonial. (Turner, 95)

The application of this description to tricksters, Soviet tricksters notwithstanding, helps explain why the trickster so typically appears as a "gentleman of the road," even if this road is only between Moscow and Petushki (Khulio Khurenito, Ostap Bender's or even Vasilii Terkin's war itineraries are far more diverse geographically, although the principle behind them is no different from that in Erofeev's masterpiece). The Soviet trickster's origins are invariably obscure due to his/her liminality ("My father was a Turkish citizen," as Ostap Bender used to say), and his/her social position is equally elusive. Granted, Turner's description of the "threshold people" points more readily at the *homo sacer* or the neophyte undergoing initiation than the trickster: they "may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked. Their behavior is normally passive or humble, they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint." (ibid., 95) It is telling that Turner, while developing his thesis on liminal subcultures, includes Leo Tolstoy and his followers, as well as Gandhi and the hippie movement, as examples, but does not mention tricksters, making an exception only for the court jester. The reason for this "omission" is probably due to the fact that Turner ties liminality to anti-structural rituals— "rituals of status reversal and the religious beliefs and practices

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of movement dominated by structural inferiors." (ibid., 200) These anti-structures (exemplified by Bakhtin's carnival) do "not mean 'anomie', but simply mean a new perspective from which to observe structure," they "involve mockery and inversion, but not the destruction of structural rules and overzealous adherents to them"; they offer people "an opportunity to strip themselves of all outward tokens and inward sentiments of status distinction [...] to escape from the communitas of necessity (which are therefore inauthentic) into a pseudostructure where all behavioral extravagances are possible." (Ibid., 201–202) It is particularly important that those anti-structural rituals that immerse a subject in a liminal state are balanced out by other cultural rituals which affirm social order and stratification—"both types of rites [...] seem to be bound up with cyclical repetitive systems of multiplex social relations." (Ibid., 202)

However, unlike other liminal roles, the trickster does not require an anti-ritual to function: s/he does not generate a separate cultural sphere, instead introducing antistructural elements into the social and cultural order and exposing and creating liminal zones *within* existing hierarchies and stratifications. His principle is not inversion but deconstruction, the undermining of the system by means of revealing and subverting its logic, a dissembling that comes not from outside but from within, from a point betwixt and between. This is why in William Hynes's apt formulation, tricksterish "metaplay ruptures the shared consciousness, the societal ethos and consensual validation—in short, the very order of order itself. [...] From the advent of metaplay, all previous orders and orderings are clearly labeled contingent." (Hynes 1993b: 215)

In the culture of modernity and especially Soviet modernity, this disposition acquires the meaning of intentionally antisocial behavior inside the social space. Because of their antistructural behavior, tricksters are frequently penalized. Usually, however, the trickster's punishment is overshadowed by the pleasure and inventiveness of his/her tricks and jokes and thus the failures do not register as 'moral lessons,' but rather as the comical trips and falls of a beloved clown. The insignificance of the trickster's defeats testifies to the unfading importance of his/her social function—the transgression of the social order.

The necessary presence of transgression in the trickster's behavior can explain why there are so few female characters in the gallery of Soviet tricksters. (There are more in the post-Soviet period, especially

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after 2000.) Since the trickster must remain attractive despite being a transgressor, the patriarchal nature of Soviet culture makes itself known in a moral double standard: the same transgressions that guarantee the appeal of a male trickster render impossible the positive reception of a woman-trickster who, if she appears at all, acquires a negative tint—Baba Yaga, as a rule played by a man (Aleksei Milliar in Aleksandr Ptushko's cinematic fairy tales and the films of his disciple Aleksander Rou), the fox Alisa from Aleksei Tolstoy's *Zolotoi kliuchik,* or old Shapokliak from Roman Kachanov's *Cherburashka* cartoon series.[2]

(3) **The Trickster Transforms His/Her Tricks into an Art Form.**

The trickster creates self-sufficient performances rather than pragmatic actions designed for a concrete purpose. The transformation of trickery and transgression into an artistic gesture—a sort of performance—is associated with the aforementioned trickster's liminality within the social order. Bakhtin was the first to reveal the artistic meaning of the trickster's liminal position: "They are life's maskers [*litsedei zhizni*]; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist." (Bakhtin 1981: 159–160, 159) The trickster's position always contains an element of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), which Victor Shklovsky defined as the fundamental effect of any artistic utterance or performance. Bakhtin, who uses a different term that is synonymous to *ostranenie*—"a form of non-comprehension"—maintains that the masks of the rogue, the clown and the fool":

> ... grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not to 'be oneself'; the right to live a life in the chronotope of the entr'acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off the masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage—and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prudent little secrets. (ibid., 163)

2 The problem of the female tricksters in folklore and mythology is examined in great detail by Jurich. See also Mills, Landay, and Lock.

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Symptomatically, the theatre and/or cinema, i.e., *performative* arts, are present in the majority of Soviet texts centered on the figure of the trickster. In *Master i Margarita*, not only are several important scenes set in the Variety Theatre, but also most of the novel's characters are associated with the theatre. In Aleksei Tolstoy's *Zolotoi kliuchik,* Buratino fights Karabas Barabas for control over the puppet theater. In Il'f and Petrov's *Zolotoi telenok,* Ostap Bender tries to sell his collection of compromising materials on Koreyko as a screenplay called *The Neck*. Yurii Detochkin in *Beregis' avtomobilia* plays Hamlet in an amateur production and the scene in the courtroom where his case is being tried is doubled in his triumph on stage. Gorin/Zakharov's *Tot samyi Munkhauzen* creates several levels of theatricality—Munchhausen's fun and poetic theatre for himself and his beloved, which is later replaced by the "official" theatralization of his "heroic life" after his fictitious death. At the same time, *ad hoc* performances are even more characteristic for Soviet trickster texts. Consider also Bender's numerous performances—the organization of the *Soiuz mecha i orala*, Vorobianinov's begging act or the spectacular crossing of the Romanian border; Terkin's comical productions of theatralized fables/jokes; Venichka's *simposion* in the regional train, etc.

Marilyn Jurich writes about the folkloric female tricksters (she terms this character "trickstar"): "Traditionally, women have not had access to or were denied entrance into spaces that men could easily traverse. For that reason they have had more need to 'talk their ways' into power and position. The woman's great aptitude for language, as casuist and solver of riddles, is widely demonstrated in methods used by the trickstar to change circumstances." (212) This observation certainly captures the likeness of certain female tricksters, such as A Huli from Pelevin's *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia*, whose artistic trickery is located in the realm of games and twists of language and discourse. However, almost the same can be said about such male tricksters as Ostap Bender or Venichka, since they are true artists of language—language occurs as the sole sphere where their freedom, manifested through tricks, can be accomplished.

(4) ***Relation to the sacred*** is the fourth and, in my opinion, the most important characteristic of the trickster trope concerns its necessary—direct or indirect—*relation to the sacred*. This is exactly what distinguishes a trickster from a thief or a crook, characters no less widespread in Soviet

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and post-Soviet culture, as well as in modern western culture: "…most modern thieves and wanderers lack an important element of trickster's world, his sacred context. If the ritual setting is missing, the trickster is missing," writes Lewis Hyde. (13) Laura Makarius argues that the trickster is the one who best reflects upon the contradictory character of the sacred itself, in particular, the associations between the sacred and the abject (dirty, impure, etc.), establishing a connection between the sacred and taboo violations. The scholar reminds us that the trickster's "sacredness has nothing to do with virtue, intelligence or dignity: it derives from his violations, which make him a possessor of magical power—which is identified with the sacred." (Makarius, 84)

It is relatively easy to detect the "sacred context" of such paradigmatic Soviet tricksters as, for instance, Bulgakov's Woland (a.k.a. Satan). The sacred context is equally conspicuous in Stierlitz from the miniseries *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, represented against the background of the sacred (in the late Soviet society) mythology of the Great Patriotic War and the Victory; as well as in Venichka, who spends his roundtrip between Moscow to Petushki in dialogue with angels and pursues a tragicomic quest for proof of the divine presence, culminating in and confirmed by Venichka's own murder.

The situation becomes more complex when one addresses such characters as Švejk, Khulio Khurenito, or Ostap Bender. These characters play with anything pretending to be serious, high, or important in contemporary society. Their manipulations typically include artistic hyperidentification with, and grotesque parody of, a social role, a set of values, or a discourse. As a result, even if these categories had sacred ambitions, they would be completely devalued and discredited at the trickster's magic touch, something which invariably provokes laughter. From this perspective it becomes obvious that "direct" relations with the sacred, as in the case of Woland or Venichka, are secondary to more fundamental, specifically tricksterish manifestations of the sacred. These manifestations can be explained through Foucault's concept of transgression as a method of sacred-production and George Bataille's symbolic economy according to which "a sumptuary operation of potlatch is the only way to return to the sacred world of immanence." (Surya, 384)

Transgression—i.e., the breaking of boundaries and reversal of social and cultural norms—is the most important device of the trickster.

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After Foucault, transgression, especially in the culture of the twentieth century, does not undermine the sacred foundations of social and cultural norms (these foundations are already shattered) but on the contrary, paradoxically *produces the sacred*. This paradox directly emerges from "the death of God," or rather, the crisis of traditional culture which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century:

> What, indeed, is the meaning of the death of God, if not a strange solidarity between the stunning realization of his non-existence and the act that kills him? But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed?* Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee that he will not exist—certainly a cause for laughter: to kill God to liberate life from the existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by this limitless existence—as a sacrifice. [...] The death of God restores us not to a limited and positivistic world but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it. (Foucault, 71–2)

At the same time, the ritualistic potlatch, the unproductive squandering of goods for symbolic reasons, is treated by Bataille as a means to "intimacy with the world," which implies the release of the subject from "thinghood," from alienation and objectification:

> Once the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored. It is this degradation that man has always tried to escape. In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy from the first*. Religion is this long effort and this anguished quest: It is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things,* and of restoring the *divine* order. (Bataille 1988: 70)

However, as Bataille shows, in modern civilization, with its cult of labor and its "principle of reality," the initial meaning of religion is either reduced or wholly lost. To compensate for this loss, archaic mechanisms

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of intimacy—and thus the production of the sacred—take center stage, preserved not only in religious rituals but also in cultural memory, in totalitarian spectacles and even in the functions of poetry. The most important of these mechanisms is the ritual of waste, of expenditure, to which Bataille, leaning on Marcel Mauss's interpretation of rituals of potlatch, grants the meaning of a universal, and not merely archaic, symbolic device, which guarantees sacred freedom in turn:

> The meaning of this profound freedom is given in destruction, whose essence is to consume *profitlessly* whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates. It does not have to destroy as fire does; only the tie that connected the offering to the world of profitable activity is severed, but this separation has the sense of a definitive consumption; the consecrated offering cannot be restored to the *real* order. […] This useless consumption is *what suits me*, once my concern for the morrow is removed. […] Everything shows through, everything is open and infinite between those who consume intensely. […] Sacrifice is heat, in which the intimacy of those who make up the system of common works is rediscovered. (ibid., 58)

Death, devouring, eroticism, luxury, war, feasts, gifts and sacrifices, as well as all sorts of transgression, including crime—all these activities are, to Bataille, varieties of potlatch. Many of the trickster's traits, above all his vitality and greed, correspond to this conception of "consumption." The way in which the trickster combines consumption and wastefulness defines him as an extremely significant representative of *modernity's notion of the sacred*.

This meaning of expenditure and waste acquires new significance in the modern period and in Soviet culture of the 1920s–30s, especially because of the prevalent cult of efficiency and the productivity and efforts toward organizing the entire society in a near-industrial way. In this context, expenditure takes on the functions of a *private sacred ritual* that simultaneously grants freedom (illusive, perhaps, but still therapeutic) from the social machinery. Not only Ostap, Khulio Khurenito and Woland, but also Buratino and Lazar Lagin's old genie Khottabych, Petr

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Aleinikov's cinema characters, along with Venichka, Yurii Detochkin from Riazanov's *Beregis' avtomobilia*, Daneliia's Afonia and Gorin / Zakharov's Munchhausen—acquired cult status in Soviet culture precisely because they possessed the ability to create a ritualistic context of potlatch-like expenditure by their every gesture, phrase, or trick. Being consistently wasteful and at the same time creative, these characters artistically generated their own sacred context which exhibited the "negative" values of non-affiliation, non-belonging, disrespect, and joyful cynicism. Their notion of the sacred is associated with both transgression and liberation from thinghood, gained by squandering anything valuable and available for the sake of performance. The Soviet trickster offers a cynical freedom from any affiliation, obligation, or idolization. (In Venichka's case, expenditure also concerns the protagonist himself, who is not only being wasteful, but also constantly wasted in the course of the narrative.)

THE TRICKSTER'S POLITICS

The trickster's continuous expenditure of everything valuable explains not only his/her frequent failures, judged on pragmatic standards, but also transforms these very failures and all the trickster's performances into direct proofs of his/her symbolic power, since, according to Bataille, "potlatch is not reducible to the desire to lose, but what it brings to the giver is not the inevitable increase of return gifts; it is the rank which it confers on the one who had the last word." (ibid., 71) Hence, the function of the trickster as a comedic double of the authorities goes beyond a particular critique of Soviet culture, but also appears to be quite important to the culture's self-description and self-reflection. As Laura Makarius argues, "the trickster is a mythic projection of the magician who, in reality or in people's desire, accomplishes the taboo violation on behalf of his group, thereby obtaining the medicines or talismans necessary to satisfy its needs and desires. Thus he plays the role of founder of his society's ritual and ceremonial life." (Makarius, 73) This characteristic obviously resonates with the functions of the Soviet authorities, especially during the first decade of Soviet history and partially during the second.

A traditional rogue frequently substitutes himself for figures of authority (Sancho Panza as a governor, Tom Canty in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* [1881]) but this substitution is, as a rule, justified by the carnival context and represents a *temporary* inversion of the order

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of things. In Soviet culture, the trickster functions differently: his/her doubling of the authorities is permanent rather than temporary; this character exposes the hidden mechanisms of official power and its core impulses. Thus the trickster can, to a certain extent, be considered the comedic representation of the *political unconscious*.

One may be sick and tired of the numerous discussions on possible parallels between Bulgakov's Woland and Stalin, and indeed, the representation of Woland as an allegory of Stalin testifies, most of all, to a lack of imagination on the part of the researchers. That aside, Woland does quote Stalin (as was first noticed by Abram Vulis[3]) while addressing Berlioz's severed head at the ball: "'Everything came true, didn't it?' continued Woland, looking into the head's eyes. 'A woman cut off your head, the meeting never took place, and I'm living in your apartment. This is a fact. And a fact is the most stubborn thing in the world.'"[4] (Bulgakov 1996: 233)

However, those who develop the "Stalinist" hypothesis fail to notice that, first, the "facts" invoked by Woland utterly contradict the materialist worldview, and second, that the context of this scene demonstrates that Woland effectively appropriates the authoritative discourse in order to demonstrate how narrow its boundaries are in comparison with his own ambivalent and liminal philosophy: "…one theory is as good as another. There is even a theory that says that to each man will be given according to his beliefs" (ibid., 233).[5] Finally, it is telling that Woland's juxtaposition of Stalin and Christ (to each—according to his beliefs) does not stop there, but immediately and parodically "defiles" the ritual of the Eucharist by replacing a chalice full of wine (symbolizing Christ's blood) with the skull of a cynic full of the blood of a murdered (sacrificed) informer and traitor, and turning the blood into wine.

A parallel that, in my view, deserves no less attention than the "Stalinist" hypothesis is the comparison of Woland to the American

3 Also see Burmistrov. Curiously, the English expression "Facts are stubborn" popularized by Stalin's words, entered the Russian from the English translation of Lesage's *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, one of the classical picaro novels of 18th century.

4 «Все сбылось, не правда ли? – продолжал Воланд, глядя в глаза головы, - голова отрезана женщиной, заседание не состоялось, и живу я в вашей квартире. Это – факт. А факты – самая упрямая в жизни вещь» (Bulgakov 1999: 1029).

5 «…все теории стоят одна другой. Есть среди них и такая, согласно которой каждому будет дано по его вере» (1999: 1029).

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ambassador William Christian Bullitt, Jr. (1891–1967), and his 1935 reception in the Spaso-House, as justified by Aleksandr Etkind:

> In the novels and plays he wrote in the 1930s, Bulgakov offers a serious portrait, imbued with faith and hope, of the omnipotent helper, who possesses absolute social or magical powers, which he applies readily and without asking anything in return in order to save the ill and impoverished artist. At the beginning of the decade he entertained expectations that Stalin might assume a similar role. It appears that in the middle of the 1930s he re-focused his hopes and aspirations on the American ambassador in Moscow. […] Bullitt's stay in Moscow more or less precisely coincided with Bulgakov's work on the third edit of his novel. It was there that the operatic devil acquired his more human qualities, approaching, as we can imagine, the person of the American ambassador as Bulgakov saw him—might and joviality, unpredictability and loyalty, humor and taste, a love of luxury and circus tricks… (Etkind, 283, 286)

If we take this parallel into account, Woland's power really seems to be situated betwixt and between—recalling at once the Soviet dictator and the American ambassador and overcoming both these models and Christ's authority at once. Woland's power appears as the adequate freedom from every generalizing concept, every dogma and every binary opposition.

One may interpret the trickster's mockery of the Soviet authorities as the manifestations of his/her anti-systemic character, and this will be a valid interpretation. However, it is not a complete explanation. From this standpoint, it remains unclear why the characteristics of the trickster are also detectable in *official* representations of power. For instance, a revolutionary hero in Soviet cultural mythology was initially modeled as a trickster. As Evgeny Dobrenko demonstrates in his analysis of Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's film trilogy *Iunost' Maksima* (*Maxim's Youth*, 1934), *Vozvrashchenie Maksima* (*The Return of Maxim*, 1937) and *Vyborgskaia storona* (*The Vyborg Side*, 1938–9), the protagonist, an exemplary Bolshevik named Maksim, was created as a "Til Eulenspigel of Russian capitalism of the beginning of the twentieth century" (Dobrenko

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2009: 333). However, as the character develops, the role of the trickster gradually transforms into a mask behind which the protagonist conceals his revolutionary activities: "Essentially, the film triptych on Maksim presents a story of the transformation of a Til Eulenspiegel into a chekist" (ibid., 337).

More frequently, in Socialist Realist literature and film the trickster played the role of sidekick to the "serious hero"—on the one hand downplaying the latter's pathos, and on the other generating empathy towards his terrifying patron. The role of the trickster-sidekick belongs to grandpa Shchukar', as a jester commenting on all the actions of the "collectivizator" Davydov in Sholokhov's *Podniataia tselina* (*Harvest on the Don*, 1932, 1960). In Aleksei Tolstoy's novel *Pyotr Pervyi* (*Peter the First*, 1930, 1934) and in the eponymous film by Vladimir Petrov (1937–38) this same function was performed by Aleksashka Men'shikov (in the film brilliantly performed by Mikhail Zharov); the same Zharov plays an analogical role in Eisenstein's *Ivan Groznyi* (*Ivan the Terrible*, 1944), there as Maliuta Skuratov. This might appear to contradict what was said above regarding the independence of the trickster as opposed to the picaro. However, this transformation is quite characteristic of the Socialist Realist adaptation of this trope: Socialist Realism tries to submit the trickster to a figure of power or to the state hierarchy. Hence, the most popular Socialist Realist trickster appears as a soldier in wartime, namely Vasilii Terkin from Aleksandr Tvardovskii's narrative poem. Yet a flipside of this process can be seen in the "tricksterization" of the sovereign—as the manifestation of the maximum amount of freedom that was permissible.

Indeed, official representations of Lenin display obvious features of the trickster, and non-official ones even more so, as Levon Abrahamian argued in his article "Lenin as a Trickster."[6] Although it is not entirely clear whether Abrahamian is discussing a historical figure or its image in the collective myths of the times, the "tricksterization" of Lenin in Soviet jokelore naturally follows from the similarity between the revolutionary power's self-presentation and the symbolic power of the trickster, who establishes a new notion of the sacred by breaking old taboos. Alexander Panchenko also remarks that in the early Soviet fakelore, "Lenin acquires the features of a cheat or a trickster: he defeats the 'exploiting classes' not

6 See Abrahamian.

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in an open fight or even by means of a 'secret word' known to him alone, but through a trick. […] Both fiction and memoirs about Lenin often use the topos of his 'slyness' as the main indicator of his 'folk character'"(26).

The trickster-like qualities acquire a new meaning during the period of Stalin's ascension to the role of the father of the Soviet nation. Mikhail Romm's films *Lenin v Oktiabre* (*Lenin in October*, 1937) and *Lenin v 1918—m godu* (*Lenin in 1918*, 1939) are very illuminating in this respect—there, according to Konstantin Bogdanov's astute observation:

> The preparation of the revolution is depicted in the films as a fascinating adventure that demonstrates Lenin's playful skills—that is, his ability to be sly, to hide, to disguise, to be persistent and yet cheerful, almost funny. The history of the October revolution appears not without trickery and happenstance, partly confirming the juxtaposition of existing Soviet cultural "folkloric" conceptions of Lenin-the-creator-of-the-revolution with folkloric tales of tricksters—characters who achieve success through cleverness and improvised behavior, which makes them the object of derision and astonishment. […] Young and old viewers of Romm's film (followed by the 1939 sequel "Lenin in 1918" by the same director) could henceforth judge Lenin's role in the history of the Soviet government while looking back at his speech defect, hilarious gestures and almost clownish escapades—the slapped-on cap, the bandage worn to imitate a tooth-ache and to hide his face from the cops, Lenin's unwillingness to sleep, inability to cook porridge, and at the same time, Lenin's unfailing "love for the children." (Bogdanov, 203–204)

Furthermore, one could even argue that Soviet political culture is marked by a peculiar version of a "twin myth" in which a "culture hero" is always paired with an evil trickster-twin. The construction of the twin myth is analogous to rituals of scapegoating, since it permits the transfer of all mistakes and failures to the figure of the Other.[7] However, the trickster-twin is not entirely evil—he is creative in his own, paradoxical,

7 See Girard on this issue.

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way. Notably, after their descent from power, personages such as Ezhov and Beriia were also "tricksterized," in the official discourse as well as in popular mythology, through an emphasis on their sexual excesses and deviations. In contemporary narratives, Beriia's trickster-like features serve as the basis for a positive re-evaluation. For instance, in Vasilii Aksenov's novels *Moskovskaia saga* (*The Moscow Saga*, 1994) and *Moskva-kva-kva* (2006) Beriia is represented as a bon-vivant and hedonist character who dreams of the radical reforming of Soviet society in the direction of liberalization.[8]

Yet even the presence of these "sidekicks" could not completely free Stalin, the perfect "culture hero," from tricksterish connotations—probably because in a mythological context the culture hero and the trickster are not just twins, but conjoined twins. In many folkloric stories about Stalin, even ones possibly told during his lifetime, he appears as a dark trickster whose jokes confirm that his power is indeed unlimited, and whose concept of excess manifests itself in the cold-blooded expenditure of human lives.

In short, it would be wrong to perceive the Soviet trickster as merely a carnivalesque alternative to Soviet values and hierarchies. As truly ambivalent and liminal personages, Soviet tricksters acquire their cultural importance exactly because they *simultaneously undermine and embody the Soviet symbolic order.*

THE TRICKSTER TROPE AND SOVIET SUBJECTIVITY

Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her book *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, demonstrates that the very process of "reforging" social identities, which laid the foundation for the "Soviet project," required trickster-like qualities from ordinary people. A kind of "tricksterdom" became crucial for the invention and/or re-writing of one's past: "Many lives are double rather than binary, for self-fashioning as a Soviet citizen implies that there is a non- or anti-Soviet self that is being denied. […] Under such circumstances, the object of the autobiographical quest is not self-discovery in the normal sense, but rather the discovery of a usable self" (Fitzpatrick 2005:152). The manipulation of class origins, family relations and biographies, as Fitzpatrick shows, did not

8 See also Lebedev and Beriia.

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constitute an exception but was practiced on a massive scale, since every new turn in the political course demanded a new metamorphosis from the Soviet citizen. Fitzpatrick's book implies that the class approach to structuring society directly provoked impostery and trickster-like handling of ordinary identities. From this standpoint, the numerous con artists and imposters, a common occurrence in Soviet society during the 1920–30s, appear to be not delinquents but people who "laid bare" (to use Shklovsky's term) the foundational "devices" of the Soviet social (dis)order:

> Soviet conmen, as virtuosos of self-invention, had their place in the great revolutionary and Stalinist project of reforging the self and society. In a prescriptive sense, to be sure, Bender was scarcely a New Soviet Man—but in a society of Old Pre-Soviet People struggling to reinvent themselves, who was? Bored by the construction of socialism, Bender and his fellow conmen were exemplars of self-construction. This makes us look more closely at the building metaphor (*stroitel'stvo sotsializma*) that was at the heart of the prewar Stalinism. Was impersonation, the tricksters' specialty, its flip side? (ibid., 280–281)

Although this explanation is valid for the 1920–30s, it does not entirely apply to the later periods of Soviet history, not to mention the post-Soviet period, when the value of class criteria for welfare and career declined significantly. However, the popularity and presence of tricksters in social and cultural life did not fade in the 1960s–80s. Obviously some other factors continued to stimulate the need for this cultural trope and its social agenda.

One of the most important aspects of the Soviet model of modernity can be detected in the phenomena of the "shadow economy" and "blat," which—as recent scholarship demonstrates—constituted permanent elements of economic and social life in the Soviet Union, growing steadily in importance and preserving their significance in post-Soviet society, in spite of the changes in the economic system. As Alena Ledeneva argues, the phenomenon of blat as a system of social networking, comprising indirect exchanges and mutual favors, is marked by the same ambivalence and liminality as the figure of the trickster, despite

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its ubiquity. Blat represented an "invisible" (from the official standpoint) "compensatory mechanism against the planned economy and ideological pressure against the legitimacy of private gain. Blat articulated private interests and 'human' needs against the rigid constraints of the State order, allowed people to meet harsh conditions to maintain their social comfort and enjoy a sense of 'beating the system'" (Ledeneva 1998: 46). It served as the "intermediary between commodity exchanges and gift-giving … [since] it involved relationships and not merely goods" (ibid. 35). While not criminal, blat was perceived as morally reprehensible, hence "the misrecognition game: it [blat] can be recognized in the case of the other, and "misrecognized in one's own case" (ibid., 60). But, most importantly, while being an obvious "transgression of social boundaries predetermined by the system" (ibid., 46), blat also functioned as its necessary component—"a reaction of ordinary people to the structural constraints of the socialist system of distribution—a series of practices, which *enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable*" (ibid., 3; emphasis mine). Hence, the "self-subversive nature of the Soviet system" (ibid., 3): the anti-systemic elements are paradoxically embedded into the core of the Soviet social and economic life.[9]

It would be wrong, however, to confine the significance of blat and the informal economic and social networks to only the late Soviet era (1960s–80s). Contrary to this otherwise narrow periodization, Sheila Fitzpatrick shows that the "shadow economy" and the accompanying system of social connections were fully present as early as the Soviet 1930s: "From the very beginning, the official distribution system, based on central planning and bureaucracy, had its unofficial Doppelgänger, the blat system based on personalistic contacts and off-the-record data. […] A web of blat networks pervaded Russian society in the Stalin period, and similar claims could also be made for patronage networks" (Fitzpatrick 2000: 167, 178). As early as 1940, a "concerned citizen" wrote to Andrei Vyshinskii, then deputy chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and former prosecutor at the infamous Moscow show-case trials: "Not to have blat, that's the same thing as having no civil rights, the same as being deprived of all rights. […] Come with a request, and they will be all deaf, blind, and dumb" (ibid., 168). Sociality based on blat was not limited to

9 On the subject of informal economy and its social role in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods see also: Lovell, Ledeneva, and Rogachevskii; Ledeneva 2002; Kliamkin and Timofeev.

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deficit items (consumer goods), but spread out to include job acquisition, career development, education (especially higher education), medical help, vacations, and even economic partnerships between businesses—a whole institution of procurement agents (*tolkachi*) existed to promote the informal functioning of the "official" economy by "acquiring" raw materials, machines, funding, etc. Perhaps the greatest difference between the "shadow economy" of Stalin's time and its modifications in the 1960s–80s consisted of the fact that blat in the 1930s–50s was restricted to the relatively well-off social classes ("The point that blat was only available to persons of means and substance was emphasized by many Harvard Project respondents" [ibid., 175–6]), while in late Soviet times, blat spread to virtually every social stratum.

The Soviet trickster is usually a master of blat (*blatmeister* in Soviet lingo) and extremely well aware of informal economic and social practices, but more significantly, s/he effectively exploits the vulnerabilities of ordinary citizens, who are—by default—involved with the "economy of favors." Yet ultimately it is a *symbolic* and not a pragmatic relationship that links the trickster to blat and the shadow economy. I would like to argue that the Soviet trickster serves *as the most important symbolic manifestation of the informal economy and of the blat social network insofar as they serve as the foundations of the Soviet society*. The trickster's mediation between opposites not only highlights the existence of a third path between legal and illegal practices and moral and immoral principles (though the legal and the moral in the Soviet system almost always represents opposing paradigms), but also manifests this path as the most vital course, the one carrying the most energy and artistry.

The trickster plays with double-speak and double-thought, but mostly s/he inhabits the gap between the symbolic and the real planes of Soviet society. Evgeny Dobrenko describes the separation of these two planes as follows:

> Socialism is the spectacle of socialism. It is a 'new reality' that bears witness to itself without needing a referent. [...] The total aesthetization of reality (and of economic reality above all), since it was originally included in the project of 'socialist construction' itself, in fact accounted for all the basic functions of Socialist Realism, transforming everything around it into 'art.' [...] [I]f in fascism politics

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> was subjected to aesthetization (with political rituals at surface level), then in socialism the process penetrated more deeply—economics was subjected to aesthetization (let us add, parenthetically, that the economics of socialism by necessity requires greater aesthetization than in capitalism, since it is far more 'ideal' economics, and its 'achievements' are far more modest). (Dobrenko 2007: 35, 38, 40)

However, this contradiction is frequently ignored in contemporary studies of Soviet subjectivity.[10] The focus *only* on the process of the internalization of Soviet modernization by Soviet subjects allows to ignore such important phenomena as guile, double-thought, mimicry, and cynicism, which, as it follows from Fitzpatrick and Ledeneva's research, were equally (if not more) crucial for the survival of Soviet subjects—and, not accidentally, were epitomized by the trickster trope. For instance, Stepan Podlubnyi, who became one of the most central figures in the studies of Soviet subjectivity, cannot be described by the means of one, even evolving, model of subjectivity. The self-modernizing subject translating the Soviet vision of modernity into everyday practice (as described by Johan Hellbeck) constitutes just one of several Podlubnyi's "personae." In a parallel course, there develops a persona of a hiding "kulak" whose exposure leads to Stepan's expulsion from the institute and who later finds himself in the prison lines seeking the information about his arrested mother. Next to these two opposite personae, Podlubnyi's diary presents the third one: a secret NKVD agent regularly meeting with his supervisor and reporting on his classmates, friends, and neighbors. Additionally, the diary documents in detail a fourth personal sub-plot, that of Podlubnyi's relationships with women, which typically take a cruel turn—it seems that he unconsciously compensates for his social humiliations through gender violence. The most amazing effect of Podlubnyi's diaries lies in the parallel coexistence of these personae, and the ease with which Stepan switches from one biographic regime to another, seemingly "forgetting" about his other "selves." This ease of inner metamorphoses and intrinsic artistism, demonstrated by an ordinary Soviet subject,

10 See Kotkin, Fitzpatrick 1999, Fitzpatrick 2000a, Halfin 2003, Kozlova, Kiaer and Naiman, Hellbeck.

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finds a direct aesthetic manifestation in the trickster trope.

As a result, the foundations of the "shadow economy," along with the peculiarities of the Soviet subject, who—in exact correspondence with Horkheimer and Adorno's definition—"saves his life by losing himself," proves fertile ground for a "shadow ideology," or more precisely the double-faced, self-subverting politics of Soviet socialism. An astute characterization of this phenomenon was given by Slavoj Žižek in the book *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*: "A whole series of markers delivered, between the lines, the injunction that such official exhortation was not to be taken too literally, that a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted—the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been for its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects" (1997: 91). Further on, while illustrating this thesis, partly on the example of the double position of Dmitrii Shostakovich—who, on the one hand, remained a relatively official Soviet composer, and on the other, was perceived by the intelligentsia as profoundly critical of the regime—Žižek underscores:

> … It is Shostakovich's very inner distance towards the 'official' Socialist reading of his symphonies that makes him a prototypical Soviet composer—this distance is constitutive of ideology, while authors who fully (over)identified with the official ideology, like Aleksandr Medvedkin […] ran into trouble. Every Party functionary, right up to Stalin himself, was in a way a 'closet dissident', talking privately about themes prohibited in public. (ibid., 125)

The trickster trope, placed into this context, obtains its socio-cultural significance as the reflection of irresolvable contradictions and yawning gaps within the social universe, first and foremost, within the existence of ordinary citizens whose loyalty and "normalcy" are inseparable from their criminal and semi-criminal participation in the "black market" economy, sociality and politics. The Soviet trickster not only reveals the duplicity in meaning, but uses this gap as a liminal zone to stage his/her transgressive "theater," thus presenting it as artistically appealing and playful—in a word, charming. The trickster, using comedy to reveal a-systemic elements inherent in Soviet economics, sociality and even politics, paradoxically overcomes these contradictions, enacting communication between the

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disparate planes of Soviet society through artistic metamorphoses. This communication (mediation) is based on the transformation of everything solid into *the apotheosis of ambivalence*, and tangibly demonstrates the uncertainty and ambiguity in the whole spectrum of societal "truths" and self-definitions—ideological (*Khulio Khurenito*), socio-economic (diptych about Ostap Bender), philosophical and religious (*Master i Margarita, Moskva-Petushki*), moral (*Beregis' avtomobilia* and *Osennii marafon*). Even such fundamental oppositions as *Soviet/foreign,* sacrosanct for the Soviet cultural understanding of the war with Nazism appear blurred in *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*. The very fact that Soviet children's culture—by default intended to produce clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, the permissible and the banned, etc.—turned out to be the breeding ground for various tricksters (from Buratino to Cheburashka)—speaks volumes about the paradoxical wholeness of Soviet culture. In other words, while the Soviet trickster exposes zones of ambivalence between the various disconnected aspects of Soviet civilization, he also generates a resonance between its mutually contradictory components, thus filling the symbolic "holes" in its fabric and producing a sense of unity, albeit invariably ironic, if not openly ridiculous.

CYNICAL OR KYNICAL?

Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983, English translation—1987) presents "a universal diffuse cynicism" (3) as one of the crucial reasons for the failure of the Enlightenment project in the culture and ideology of the twentieth century. Sloterdijk defines cynicism as "enlightened false consciousness" (6) as opposed to Marx's classical definition of ideology as "false consciousness": "It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already effectively buffered" (5). According to Sloterdijk, cynical reason emerges as a product of disappointment in the practical and political effects of the Enlightenment and develops in the course of accommodating to the ever-changing repressive politics of modernity. Cynicism offers the modern subject a strategy of quasi-socialization that reconciles the unconscious and the

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super-ego by splitting the subject into several unstable, equally authentic and equally false social masks. As a result, the social space becomes totally theatrical, which in turn produces a culture of mistrust, where the expectation of deception, the readiness to trick and to be tricked and the admiration for tricksters become universal. For instance, Sloterdijk writes about the socio-cultural atmosphere in the Weimer Republic:

> Fraud and expectations of being defrauded became epidemic.... In those years, it proved to be an omnipresent risk of existence that from behind all solid illusions, the untenable and chaotic emerges... In such an insecure world, the impostor grew into a character type of the times par excellence.... The impostor also became an indispensable figure in the sense of collective self-assurance, a model of the times and a mythical template. With a view toward the impostor, the need to clarify this ambiguous life, in which continually everything came out differently from the way it was "intended," was accommodated in the most favorable way. (483–84)

Sloterdijk argues that fascism emerges from this cultural atmosphere, although it presents itself as an antithesis to the cynical culture. Fascism positions itself as the enemy of ambivalence, histrionics and deception, supposedly overcoming the cynical components of culture. It does so through the promotion of a radically primitive and reductionist conservative mythology, which is presented as a modern tool capable of releasing modernity from its controversial and demoralizing effects. The same can be said about the mythology of Stalinism and the Stalinist model of "archaic modernization."

However, as the philosopher demonstrates, fascism—and we can add: Stalinism, in fact, represent the highest manifestations of the cynical culture. First, totalitarian mythology originates from the same philosophical premises as cynical culture: "In their approach, they are all chaotologists. They all assume the precedence of the unordered, the hypercomplex, the meaningless, and that which demands too much of us. Cynical semantics ... can do nothing other than to charge order to the account of cultural caprice or the coercion toward a system," (399)—and coercion it is!

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Second, in totalitarian culture, theatricality becomes a crucial weapon of political warfare, not only in the theatrical representation of the leader (as in Nazism) and the aesthetics of mass political spectacles (from demonstrations to show-case trials). No less important is the performance of the power's transcendental status, which is guaranteed by messianic ideology, as well as by spectacles of national unity that cover up constant, "tactical" ideological shifts, struggles within the upper echelons of power, the transformation of heroes into enemies, the appropriation of "hostile" ideological doctrines and practices etc. The fact that these cynical "tactics" hide beneath the umbrella of "monolithic ideology" explains why the model of the trickster as a figure of supreme power became so popular in Soviet culture, despite its alleged marginality/liminality.

Cynicism proves to be impenetrable to rational or emotional critique: "No critique can cope with this gelatinous realism, for critique cannot achieve any validity when it is not confronted by an ignorance … Even a critique that itself becomes cynical in order to smash the predominating cynicism is deflected" (385). The only functional opposition to cynicism found by Sloterdijk is the category of *kynicism*: "Cynicism can only be stemmed by kynicism, not by morality. Only a joyful kynicism of ends is never tempted to forget that life has nothing to lose except itself" (194). Kynicism appears as the artistic aspect of cynicism. In the philosopher's opinion, kynicism shares two fundamental principles with cynicism: "The first is the motif of *self-preservation* in crisis-ridden times, the second a kind of shameless, 'dirty' realism that, without regard for conventional moral inhibitions, declares itself to be for how 'things really are'" (193). However, the main distinction between cynicism and kynicism lies in the fact that contemporary cynicism, as a rule, combines "a rigorous cynicism of means with an equally rigid moralism of ends" (192), while kynicism is much more radical—it undermines the concept of goals altogether:

> This means taking leave of the spirit of long-term goals, insight into the original purposelessness of life, limiting the wish for power and the power of wishing.… The essence of kynicism consist in a critical, ironical philosophy of so-called needs, in the elucidation of their fundamental excess and absurdity. […] Kynical reason culminates in the knowledge—decried as nihilism—that

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> we must snub the grand goals. In this regard we cannot be nihilistic enough. (194)

The principled "cheekiness" of a kynic (and of the trickster as well) is the result of the particular integrity of the kynical position: rejecting a cynical chasm between means and ends, the kynic escapes the schizophrenic fragmentation afforded by cynical reason; instead of the manipulation of social masks, the kynic offers a *metamorphosis*, the artistic flexibility of the subject, a transformation engaging body and mind. Sloterdijk also argues that the kynic possesses a specific sort of shamelessness—which, by the way, is equally characteristic of the trickster.[11] In the given context, shamelessness implies the rejection of moral taboos surrounding bodily functions, the equation of intellectual and corporeal activities—in short, "existence in resistance, in laughter, in refusal, in the appeal to the whole of nature and a full life" (218).

The dialectics of cynicism and kynicism (as the only effective weapon against the former) can be well illustrated by Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*. Having begun work on his "sunset novel" in the late 1920s (the first version was completed in 1928), Bulgakov, as we know, continued writing *Master i Margarita* until his death in 1940. However, the novel failed to reflect the fundamental shift in the social and political culture which, as many historians maintain, took place in the late 1920s–early 30s and signified the formation of Stalinism. Apparently, for Bulgakov the 1920s and 1930s represented a *homogenous process*, characterized by the domination of cynics and a general atmosphere of cynicism, as "announced" in the conversation between Woland, Berlioz and Ivan Besdomnyi in the first chapter of the novel. Taken together, the central characters and the seemingly marginal personages of the Moscow chapters constitute an all-embracing hierarchy of cynics and various types of cynicism.

Daniel Vyleta accurately defines the meaning of Bulgakov's cynic for the understanding of Soviet subjectivity when argues that Bulgakov depicts "a society in which everyone accepts the discrepancy between

11 Lewis Hyde analyzes the trickster's shamelessness through the motif of dirt associated with this character in numerous myths: "…what tricksters in general like to do, is erase or violate that line between the dirty and the clean," including "revivification through dirt" (Hyde 177). Hyde adds that in this respect the cultural function of the trickster is similar to the functions of the carnival in Bakhtin's conceptualization.

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public game and private self as the 'form of life' that is theirs. Everyone is by definition, a crook, because he/she holds on to a private self, and everyone needs and cherishes a private self in order to survive.... Indeed, the [Soviet] system gains stability by having cynical subjects rather than believing ones... The cynical, liberal subject—that is the kind of subject most prevalent in Bulgakov's Moscow, and, for all the official doctrine, it may the kind of subject most conductive to political stability: a game-player who cannot see beyond the monopoly board" (45–6).

1. A monument to Koroviev and Behemoth in Moscow, architect and sculptor Liubov' Mirosenko. A photo from http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/novicova/post115691662/

Cynical survivors, such as the ubiquitous Annushka or the public at the black magic séance, occupy its lowest level. Then follow "those who know how to live well," in other words, exemplary family men and moralists who support their families' welfare through petty theft and bribery—the house manager Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi, the bartender Andrei Fokich Sokov, and Maximilian Poplavsky, Berlioz's uncle from Kiev. The next level of cynicism is reserved for those who abuse the sphere of art, which in Bulgakov's book is a far worse crime than mere bribery; here the reader finds Styopa Likhodeev and Zhorzh Bengalsky, the chief of the "Acoustic commission" Arkadii Apollonovich Sempleiarov and the entire staff of the Commission of Spectacles and Entertainments

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(i.e. the poor souls who became the targets of Koroviev and Behemoth's tricks). Those intellectuals who "survive" in the sphere of the new Soviet ideology represent a higher level of cynicism. They include first and foremost Berlioz and initially Ivan Bezdomnyi, but also the critics who panned the Master's novel—Latunsky, Lavrovich and Ariman, the poet Riukhin ("I don't believe in anything I've ever written"[12] [Bulgakov 1996: 60]), as well as the entire MASSOLIT. All these cynics are best described in the Master's characterization of the many negative articles devoted to his novel in chapter 13: "I couldn't get rid myself of the thought—that the authors of these articles weren't saying what they wanted to say, and that that was why they were so furious." (ibid., 121)[13] Finally, the highest level of cynicism—cynical authority—is represented by the two professional provocateurs; Aloizii Mogarych and Baron Maigel (the latter sacrificed along with Berlioz at Woland's Ball), as well as by Pontius Pilate in the Jerusalem chapters.

Woland and his suite are not opposed to this cynical pyramid; rather, they represent the best and most attractive aspects of cynical reason, thus offering a comical justification (or even a subverted blessing?) to those they mock and trick. Ignoring this function of Woland's and of his associates, or interpreting them as a force of moral retribution bringing just punishment to evil-doers, leads to numerous contradictions. For instance, why does Woland openly glorify the ambivalent: "What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared? After all, shadows are cast by things and people. [...] Do you want to strip the earth of all trees and living things just because of your fantasy of enjoying naked light? You're stupid."[14] (ibid., 305) Why do Woland's associates perform so many illogical tricks, often without the least implication of retribution? Why and for what sin is Professor Kuz'min punished when the bartender Sokov pleads that Kuz'min save him from cancer? What is the didactic value of converting Bosoi's bribe into foreign currency, or transforming the Variety's box

12 «... не верю я ни во что из того, что пишу!..» (1999: 894).

13 «Мне все казалось, - и я не мог от этого отделаться, - что авторы этих статей говорят не то, что они хотят сказать, и что их ярость вызывается именно этим» (1999: 944).

14 «... что бы делало твое добро, если бы не существовало зла, и как бы выглядела земля, если бы с нее исчезли тени? Ведь тени получаются от предметов и людей ... Не хочешь ли ты ободрать весь земной шар, снеся с него прочь все деревья и все живое из-за твоей фантазии наслаждаться голым светом? Ты глуп» (1999: 1088).

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office earnings into scrap paper and then foreign currency in turn, provoking the arrest of innocents? Finally, why is Varenukha made into a vampire and Rimsky driven mad?

These contradictions would disappear if, instead of accepting Woland and his host as moralists (fighting injustice and punishing evil-doers), one reconsiders them as the epitome of Soviet cynicism—super-tricksters much like their victims, but different in that they free their own cynicism from the least pragmatic overtones (money = scrap paper, clothing = nakedness). Woland and his suite playfully demonstrate the relativity of all values, which is why "good" and "evil" fall victim to their tricks indiscriminately.

The excess and lack of any pragmatic motive underlying Koroviev and Behemoth's tricks are the best evidence of the artistic, self-sufficient nature of their acts: the wastefulness of these gestures denotes both the sacred and the poetic. These tricks are well characterized by Bataille's dictum on poetry: "It signifies creation by the means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of sacrifice." (Bataille 1985: 120) This characteristic equally applies to all of Woland's guests at the ball (except for the repenting Frieda)—they are celebrated for acting in excess of the pragmatic, taking an almost artistic approach to evildoing, which includes terrifying transgressions (Maliuta Skuratov also appears in the crowd).

Woland's philosophy best fits Sloterdijk's definition of Mephistopheles as "a kynical enlightener" (180) who perceives "the so-called evil as an unavoidable side; that puts [him] right in the middle and above it at the same time. Evil appears to [him] as something that by its very nature cannot be anything other than what it is. The prototypes of this 'evil', which is stronger than morality are free sexuality, aggression, and unconsciousness…" (ibid.) Woland and his associates not only defamiliarize"normal" Soviet cynicism, they also manifest it in a *joyful and playful* way, thus transforming everything into a theatrical show, a ball, a cascade of jokes and puns, a clownish performance with real (real?) gunfights and fires.

Thus, from the trickster's perspective, the entire Soviet world re-emerges as united by *cynicism* if, following Sloterdijk's suggestion, we associate cynicism with the state when "the everyday ontological border between game and seriousness is blurred and the safety gap between fantasy and reality has melted away, the relation between what is

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respectable and what is bluff slackens." (488) Furthermore, I shall argue that the Soviet trickster's indiscriminate laughter offers *a joyful epiphany of cynicism*, thus releasing this universal Soviet modus of behavior from its sense of guilt and criminality.

Soviet tricksters provide numerous examples of kynicism. Khulio Khurenito methodically transforms all serious—and invariably cynical—rituals and discourses of power, including those of the revolutionary Russia, into self-deconstructing kynical performances (see chapter 2). Ostap Bender's lecture on the future glory of New Vasiuki as the chess capital of the world and the ensuing chess match present a kynical version of Soviet utopianism; his participation in the car race kynically devalues the spectacle of Soviet industrial progress, and his hunt for Koreyko makes a comical spectacle of both the mechanisms of the "black market" and the Soviet paranoid search for "hidden enemies" (see chapter 3.) Venichka in *Moskva-Petushki* artistically transforms alcoholism, a powerful sign of cynical alienation, into a comical spiritual practice, in which fantastic cocktails comprised of foot remedies and insect repellent are offered to God as though sacred gifts, graphs rating alcohol consumption depict the sinners' souls, and a hiccup serves as theodicy (see chapter 5.) Even the super-serious Stierlitz—as will be shown later (see chapter 6)—represented the late Soviet intelligentsia's cynical acceptance of the despised political system as an entertaining game of wits providing—as the final prize—a kynical, goal-less, alibi for collaboration with the regime.

Both cynics and kynics compensate for the "closed" character of society, creating networks of social communication outside or beyond the rigid, yet self-contradictory structure. However, if a cynic freely switches social roles and holds no beliefs while pursuing his/her pragmatic or material self-interest, a kynical trickster represents survival in a cynical, contradictory and inadequate world not as a necessity, but as an opportunity for creativity, play, and freedom.

Thus, the dichotomy of cynic/kynic provides a fitting explanation of the role of trickster trope and its functions in the Soviet culture. I would like to argue that b*y creating sympathetic and profound images of tricksters, Soviet* culture *was uplifting its own cynicism to a kynical level.* This operation, on the one hand, provided an alibi or even an artistic justification of ubiquitous cynical practices; yet, on the other hand, it presented the sole valid alternative to cynicism.

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This is why in all significant Soviet texts about tricksters, beginning with those written in the 1920s, the tricksters confront not fanatics or idealists, but rather seasoned cynics, who only pretend to have ideals and beliefs but in fact are con artists themselves, albeit far less artistic and less amenable than the protagonists. Thus, Khulio Khurenito tackles numerous political and ideological cynics, including his own 'disciples'; Ostap Bender is opposed to Kisa Vorobianinov in *Dvenadtsat' stuliev* and to Koreyko in *Zolotoi telenok*; Buratino confronts Karabas Barabas and Duremar in *Zolotoi kliuchik*; Venichka Erofeev belatedly realizes that his enemies are cynical angels; Stierlitz struggles against Müller (though their warfare ends in a truce); Baron Munchhausen in Gorin/Zakharov's film confronts an entire city of cynics; and in post-Soviet culture, the kynical werefox A-Huli is opposed to the cynical werewolf Sasha Seryi, with whom she has a dramatic love affair (see chapter 8). At the same time, these characters frequently appear as Doppelgängers of trickster-protagonists, thus highlighting the permeability of the border between the cynic and the kynic.

Artistic phenomena agree with the observations of those historians and sociologists who directly or incidentally confirm the compatibility of Sloterdijk's model to Soviet culture. Oleg Kharkhordin's research on the concept of the individual in Soviet culture of the 1930s–1960s operates partly through the concept of "dissimilation," largely synonymous with Sloterdijk's concept of cynicism. In this scholar's opinion dissimulation is, first of all, not only the product, but also the process of an individual's social adaptation, and secondly, it is the unconscious, rather than purposeful, splitting of the self into different, even opposing, social roles:

> Their double-faced life is not a painful split forced upon their heretofore unitary self; on the contrary, this split is normal for them because they originate as individuals by the means of split. [...] One of the steps in this long development was individual perfection of the mechanism for constant switching between the intimate and the official, a curious kind of unofficial self-training, a process that comes later that the initial stage of dissimilation conceived as 'closing off' (*pritvorstvo*) and one that we may more aptly call dissimilation as 'changing faces' (*litsemerie*). (Kharkhordin, 275, 278)

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In Kharkhordin's book, dissimilation appears as a major vector of the socio-political "selection of the fittest" in Soviet society:

> [I]f you are not in a shell, you cannot survive. Not only because of terror that eliminates unskillful dissimulators or non-dissimulators but also because a new dynamic is now at work: dissimulators, having become the dominant type of Soviet individual, force everyone to become one. Those who did not learn to dissimulate 'naturally' will be made to learn dissimulation by force. Even the residual Bolshevik saints are forced to adopt a dissimulative posture. (ibid., 276)

Alexei Yurchak in his book on late Soviet society, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation,* at first glance, discusses the interpretation of Soviet culture as essentially cynical, noting: "All these models share a crucial problem: although they provide an alternative to the binary division between the recognition and misrecognition of ideology, they do so by producing another problematic binary between 'truth' and 'falsity,' 'revealing,' and 'dissimulating.'" (Yurchak 2006: 17) Yurchak proposes a different approach to the study of late Soviet culture (synthesizing Derrida's, Bourdieu's, and Butler's models), focusing on the performative aspects instead and revealing those performative discourses that produced new knowledge while seemingly remaining within the ossified space of the official ideological discourse and its accompanying rituals. In this scholar's opinion:

> … the uniqueness of the late-socialist context lay in the fact that those who ran the Komsomol and party meetings and procedures themselves understood perfectly well that the constative dimension of most ritualized acts and texts had become reinterpreted from its original meaning. […] It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings. […] The performative reproduction of the form of rituals and speech acts actually *enabled* the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings in

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> everyday life, including those that did not correspond to the constative of authoritative discourse. (ibid., 25)

Further on, while analyzing such examples of the "performative reproduction of the form of rituals," as "Komsomol work," *stiob* and *anekdot*, black humor, the cultural activities of *Mit'ki*, conceptualist poetry and the *necrorealist* film, Yurchak indicates that the effects of these cultural practices are similar to those that we discussed above in relation to tricksters and "cynical reason." For instance, Yurchak singles out as vital certain discursive operations which, as he shows, bring about the effect of deterritorialization: "The Soviet system was undergoing an internal deterritorialization, becoming something quite different, although at the level of authoritative representation this shift remained relatively invisible. Unlike the dissident strategies of opposing, the system's dominant mode of signification, deterritorialization reproduced the mode at the same time as it shifted, built upon, and added new meaning to it." (ibid., 116) A similar semiotic mechanism was previously described in connection to the trickster, who is prone to undermining the logic and connectedness of a system while remaining at once within and beyond dominating discourses and structures.

When Yurchak discusses *stiob*, a particular type of irony formed in late Soviet culture, he describes the internal mechanism of this performative discourse as follows: "… the aesthetics of *stiob* was based on a grotesque 'overidentification' with the *form* of an authoritative symbol, to the point that it was impossible to tell whether the person supported that symbol or subverted it with a subtle ridicule. […] In addition to the act of *overidentification* with the symbol, the *stiob* procedure involved a second act: the *decontextualization* of that symbol." (ibid., 252) This characteristic seems to correspond neatly to the peculiar artistry embodied by the trickster and Sloterdijk's kynic. It is not surprising that while determinedly contradicting the proposal that Soviet culture is cynical, Yurchak simultaneously adopts Sloterdijk's description of kynism as "humor that has ceased to struggle," finding in this formula the most fitting description of the cultural functions of all the aforementioned phenomena of late socialism. In this way, Yurchak implicitly accepts the characterization of late Soviet culture as *kynical*, though rejecting—most likely, due to the ethical aspect of the term— its characterization as cynical.

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However, despite Sloterdijk's claims, it must be noted that the cynic is never absolutely opposed to the kynic. In twentieth century culture the kynic is a *super-cynic* (as the example of Woland and his retinue demonstrates), that is, a cynic who turns cynicism into an art—a self-sufficient game which is more important than any pragmatic gains. As Žižek argued, uniting in his analysis of modern ideological phantasms Sloterdijk and Lacan: a society of cynics is founded on a secret pleasure (*jouissance*), which assures agreement with the mechanisms of social repression[15]. Simply put, *jouissance* is grounded in the fact that the rigidity of the law is compensated for by laxity in its enforcement. The contemporary "slave" experiences *jouissance* from the opportunity to deceive "the master." The contemporary authority experiences *jouissance* by allowing for the opportunity to deceive it by this means on the one hand channeling opposition and resistance into harmless forms, and on the other, rendering each of its subject vulnerable, since each and everyone appears to be involved into some kind of transgression, criminal or otherwise.

But *jouissance* is always a secret, always hidden on the level of the political unconscious. The trickster turns cynicism into a performance and thus exposes this "secret," or rather *estranges* it, transferring the reception of *jouissance* to the level of aesthetic enjoyment for its very artistry, its playfulness. It is this operation that is capable of transmuting cynicism into kynicism.

The borders between the cynical and the kynical are blurred and mutable precisely because both positions are rooted in the trickster myth and discourse and appear as their manifestations. Furthermore, cynicism and kynicism offer two major—albeit interrelated—social modalities of the trickster trope in Soviet culture, and perhaps, in twentieth century culture as a whole. At the same time, the dialectic of cynical and kynical reason is directly responsible for the overtones and meanings of the trickster's function in Soviet culture.

A critical analysis of the trickster trope in literature and film offers a fertile opportunity to draw a virtual map of Soviet and post-Soviet c/kynical reason, that is, to identify its symbols, discourses, contradictions, and thus its historical development from the 1920s to the 2000s. This history begins with the perception of the revolution as the self-

15 See Žižek 1997: 45-60.

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deconstruction of the modern methods of "hollowing out the self," which, with the help of the trickster, eagerly turn into kynical performances of their own absurdity (as in Erenburg's novel), which in its turn, leads to the realization that the cynical modernity not only survived the revolution but also assumed the role of the foundation of the new Soviet society, (as is revealed in Il'f and Petrov's dyptich and allegorically manifested in Aleksei Tolstoy's literary wondertale). If Ostap Bender and Buratino manage to overcome the restraints of the social order by their joyful kynicism while at the same time providing aesthetic justification to the former, Venedikt Erofeev transforms the trickster into a tragic character who realizes that his kynism not only places him outside of society—which he proudly accepts—but also forces him into the confrontation with the metaphysical order, no less cynical than the Soviet world. While Erofeev's Venichka becomes a paradigmatic example of the identity of the underground *intelligent,* Soviet comedies of the 60s–80s as well *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* demonstrate how the trickster trope was adopted for the justifications of the intelligentsia's strategies of survival in and adaptation to the late soviet social order. These strategies stretch from the versions of the disengagement from the universally accepted cynical reason (from Gaidai's victorious Shurik to protagonists of "sad comedies" Detochkin and Buzykin, and finally to a romantic dissident Baron Munchhausen) to the collaboration with the cynical system in the capacity of a double-agent with his own, secret, agenda (Stierlitz). The post-Soviet rearrangement of the cynical reason leads to a new conceptualization of the trickster which splits (as emblematized by Pelevin's shape-shifters) into two antagonistic, yet interconnected, positions: a violent trickster-in-power, and a postmodern "deconstructor" who resurrects the kynical impulse only to break out from another quasi-ideological self-mystification. In short, the cynical subject at first emerges as the manifestation of the revolution, then as the force—secretly undermining the regime, and eventually as the manifestation of the regime itself, yet at the same time, continuing to function as the force deconstructing the social order. Certainly, this outline does not cover the entire history of the Soviet cynical subject, yet, I believe that the trickster trope offers some important clues for its further investigation.

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